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ABSTRACT

A new look at the teaching of English composition is needed. The emotional approach must be substituted by a thinking philosophy. The problem is to restore the proper balance between medium and message, form and content, potency and act, abstract and concrete, connotation and denotation. This involves the restoration of reason to its rightful place. Ways in which man thinks, knows, and communicates are probed. It is concluded that: (1) Man is a unique composite of body and spirit; (2) Man knows, by perceiving the world with his five senses, and through his intellect considers his sensual impressions and abstracts from them ideas, or meanings to which he gives names, or words; (3) Man communicates these ideas by speaking or writing. This is a verbalizing activity and is also an intellectual one aimed at the transmittal of meaning from one human being to another. This is the heart of the teaching-learning process, a process that must be implemented in English composition classes. (CK)

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OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES

Restoring Balance to the Teaching of Composition

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OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES

Restoring Balance to the Teaching of Composition

It has become apparent to this teacher of English that a new, cold, hard look at the teaching of language is needed. It may be that the philosophy of language needs a new definition. It may be that a newer view of an old philosophy will suffice. Please bear with me as I try to trace out and share with you some thoughts. While directly relating to language and the teaching of language skills, these ideas also have to do with our views of ourselves as people, as teachers, and as professors of a certain discipline, and of our views of our students as well. I think these ideas are mighty significant. You be the judge!

Certain prophets of doom, including some within our profession, have cried with alarm that the very survival of our society is threatened by an increasing number of unprecedented, and, to date, insoluble problems. They insist that something - not quite all that specific, perhaps - but something be done. By strange, and circuitous extensions of logic these apocalyptic augurs infer that a multitude of problems - including mental illness, drug addiction, suicide, campus unrest, the war in Viet Nam, pollution and campus parking - are somehow related to, or have been caused by, or have become the concerns of education! They suggest that the violence of the past and the problems of the present are directly attributable to the insensitivity of a hide-bound educational Establishment. How much truth is there here?

Reduced to simple terms, these doom-sayers attack schools and teachers. Here is what they have been saying. Marshall McLuhan says that the "school" is now irrelevant, Norbert Wiener avers that the "school" shields young people from society, John Gardner insists that the "school" educates for obsolescence, Jerome Bruner charges that the "school" does not develop intelligence, John Holt notes that the "school" is based on fear, Carl Rogers accuses the "school"

of avoiding the promotion of significant learning, Paul Goodman says the "school" induces alienation, Edgar Friedenberg concludes that the "school" punishes creativity and independence. If one substitutes the word "education" for "school" then these attacks should provoke a certain degree of alarm in those people involved in this business of education. Certain ideas of Alfred Korzybski in semantics, Alan Watts in religion, I. A. Richards in literature and Adelbert Ames and Earl Kelly in education have been used by the most vociferous critics of modern education to provoke shock waves in the once placid educational mill pond. Perhaps some teachers need to be shocked out of their complacent attitudes.

Consequently many teachers have become rattled and unsure of themselves and their methods. It is important to understand that these views of education and teachers are largely emotional. They are the result of feeling and not thinking. As Albert Hastorf, the Stanford Dean of Humanities and Sciences put it recently, "In the 'feel-not-think' philosophy they saw their world coming to an end. This Fall, the point of many lectures has been that thinking is not necessarily an ally of Fascism." It seems to me that non-thinking and anti-intellectualism are the real allies of totalitarianism. They are the real enemies of teaching. This I would stress. I propose for your consideration that the non-thinking attitude and anti-intellectualism arising from the fuzzy-minded interpretation of certain popular prophets, educational innovators and vague purveyors of voguery are the true producers of educational chaos and disorder. If we are truly teachers of composition we presumably are dedicated to truth, clarity and coherence. We must, then, restore some balance to our discipline. We must move away from the "feel-not-think" philosophy to something more balanced and more representative of man's nature. Our critics must be challenged - and answered.

It strikes me that, like the fabled blind men of India, our critics, feeling their way around the massive body ofthe educational elephant, have drawn incorrect conclusions, have blindly scribbled their charges on placards and have marched off to attack the marauding mastodon - only to find themselves mere faded gurus, wandering along at the tag-end of the educational parade. It may be that the student protest movement, in spite of its violence, and not because of it necessarily, has called the attention of the public to many weaknesses in our educational system. But to accuse all teachers, professors and administrators as unfeeling and uncaring, or unresponsive to change, is vicious and false. Change is the key-word. So, too, the restoration of sanity and balance is also change!

One of the foremost critics of modern education who prefers to look upon his teaching as a "subversive activity" proposes the thesis that "change - constant, accelerating, ubiquitous - is the most striking characteristic of the world we live in." He then goes on to say that "the educational system has not yet recognized this fact." This sort of accusation is typical of critics of the "feel-not-think" school. It is just too easy to set up educational straw-men and then to destroy them with a withering fire of fatuous "feeling." It is all too true that the ever-increasing rate of change in our world is producing the sort of "future shock" that Toffler writes about. But it is equally false that teachers do not recognize change or do not respond to changing conditions.

Change is in the very nature of things. Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas recognized this fact. Man changes. Man's world changes. Language changes. Education is geared - both to change - and to changing. The very processes of education involve change - changing attitudes - changing people. Now what does this recognition of change mean to us as teachers of English composition? Simply put, we are being called on to reassess ourselves, or our view of

ourselves and our methods. What sort of activity are we involved in? Are we engaged in a "subversive activity?" "Inversive?" "Perversive?" "Conversive?" Or are we simply teachers engaged in a profession? Are we simply "professors" in the literal sense of the word? Those who profess, who declare and admit openly and freely, who acknowledge without concealment before all men and who stand up for an accounting of our knowledge and our worth? This, I take to be both the essence and existence of the true teacher. In a sense, we are, by our training and experience, committed to profess our knowledge, our skills, our expertise - in other words, we have a message. We are committed to a discipline. We are, therefore, at one and the same time disciples - as well as teachers - dedicated both to the reception and transmittal of knowledge. This is our message! Let us then act as professionals!

Unfortunately the doom-sayers and destroyers of straw-men have succumbed to such Twentieth Century shibboleths and catch phrases as, "The medium is the message (massage)," as McLuhan puts it. Our critics, in their fascination with the message of the mass media and in their fear of form, have over-reacted to the point that they have lost the proper balance between medium and message, between form and content, between potentiality and actuality, between abstract and concrete, between connotation and denotation. This is the very stuff of our discipline! You can see that a restoration of proper balance between these antinomies is sorely needed. This balance rests on an analysis of our discipline that is at least philosophical, if not indeed psycholinguistic in approach.

Before suggesting some ways whereby we may be able to restore a balance in our compositional efforts, it is necessary to show how the critics and doom-sayers have misinterpreted McLuhan's message, or have chosen to emphasize the mediumistic aspect of his ideas while overlooking, or ignoring his message.

Critics of the traditional disciplines are fond of emphasizing McLuhan's preoccupation with phrase-making and punning. They gleefully point out that he advocates a fragmented and pointillistic pedagogy as a means of overcoming the rigidities of linear, one-thing-at-a-time discourse. If McLuhan can be praised for anything it may be that he has made us look and think about things which have been under our noses all the time! A review of a recent book on McLuhan makes the point that, "The medium may not actually be the message, as his programmatic slogan suggests, but it shapes it more than we were inclined to think." Similarly McLuhan's insight regarding his notions of linearity is to be reckoned with, but over-emphasis of the idea of linearity in writing and language completely overlooks the fact that the very nature of the electronic media (television for example) is also linear - albeit linearity at an extremely rapid rate. A more balanced criticism of McLuhan reveals a certain mixed-up combination of sense and nonsense in his writings. This has been overlooked by those critics of education who have chosen him as their guru. Like his fellow Catholic, the late Teilhard de Chardin, McLuhan is given to making the large cosmic statement, but, unlike Teilhard, McLuhan painfully plods out of a patchwork tissue of myth and fact. He does not have the informing philosophical foundation of the priest-scientist. I do not imply that I choose to ignore McLuhan's contribution to our understanding of media, message and the global nervous network of our modern electronic communications media. I do submit, however, that his ideas have at least been over-simplified, and at most, perverted, by some modern simplistic critics of education and teachers of language.

The problem, as I have indicated, is to restore the proper balance between medium and message, form and content, potency and act, abstract and concrete, connotation and denotation. This involves the restoration of reason to its rightful place. Reason, of course, is equated with thinking. That

thinking is important to us as teachers of language will, I believe, become obvious - if it is not already. So far we have been speaking in pretty general "abstractions." Before we get down to the nitty-gritty of English composition there still remain three philosophical questions to consider: (1) What is man? (2) How does man know? (3) How does man communicate?

What is man? If man is only a sociological, enthropological, materialistic, economic entity, then we are wasting a hell of a lot of time in getting this naked ape to think. We should be directing our efforts merely to get this animal to respond to the proper stimuli necessary for survival. We should train man to be best able to manipulate his fellow animals for social, sexual and economic gain - for self-aggrandizement, self-satisfaction and power over his peers. If the whole body of world literature cannot be used to help students to make more money, or to "get ahead," then we are wasting our time.

I offer you some heady old wine. This vintage is concocted from the idea that man, somehow, is a unique composite of body - and of some other immaterial aspect we might call - the mind, the spirit, the atmen, the nous - the soul, or whatever. We must, then, reach out to our students - body and soul. This involves restoring another balance. We must shift emphasis from the feel-not-think school of pedagogy to the feel-and-think discipline.

How does man know? This is a tough problem. It is compounded by adding to it the consideration: How does man know that he knows? If man merely responds to stimuli as did Pavlov's dogs then all we have to do to get the communicative ideas of composition across is to provoke a stimulus - response situation in every classroom session. This sort of response can be easily programmed. All that is required is the perversion of our students through an Orwellian orgy of electronic teaching machines engaged in pedagogic

pederasty. Shakespeare or Shelley, Milton or Macauley, never faced computer programming. Today, while not impossible, they would be somewhat difficult to program effectively. But, if composition is based only on a stimulus - response technique, and is strictly functional and utilitarian, then it can easily be taught by a computer-devise program of patterned responses. Such a pedagogical horror could virtually eliminate the whole language program in our colleges - if not eliminate the colleges themselves - A Brave New World indeed! And yet, there are those, like Ivan Illich, who would do just this!

However, let us taste some more mellow, old wine. Without getting involved in epistemological speculation I think it is fairly safe to say that all man's knowledge comes through his senses. At this point we are one with the "feel-not-think" people. "Perception" now becomes the magic word. How can we best help the student use his five senses to his greatest ability? There has been a rash of new texts based on the development of perception. The use of these texts demands a lot from the teacher, but the effort is well worthwhile and prodigiously productive. However, development of perception is not by itself enough. Another balance must be restored. Perception is an essential first step in the acquisition of compositional skills, but the next step is even more important - and involves the contemplation, reflection, or consideration of the perceptions acquired through the senses. The essential operations involved here are observation and judgement. This leads to the third and final basic question.

How does man communicate? If man is merely a modern replicate of an ancient primate - naked apes in blue jeans and mini-skirts, then grunts and groans, facial and bodily expressions and attitudes, monosyllabic utterances of acid-rock pop singers would be enough to maintain communication - if only on the "Me Tarzan, you Jane" level.

I offer you a last draft of the wine of an older wisdom. Communication is the simple sharing, imparting, or conveying of information - thoughts - ideas - the transmittal of meaning. It can be done in many ways - not least through speaking and writing, but it is first and foremost an activity, - but an activity which is nearly always preceded by thinking, or intellection. Therefore, as teachers, we have to appeal to the intellective part of the human entity - the student's mind. We talk and we write, hence we think about what is going on around us. We try to convey the meaning of what we think. Meaning, however, is not in words. Meaning is in people. Whatever meanings words have are assigned, or have been ascribed to them by people. A word that has a referent beyond our experience is meaningless. The word, contrary to McLuhan, is not the thing. Yet words often assume a life of their own and often become more important than the reality they intend to codify.

However, a prolonged discussion of the relation between language and reality could get us bogged down in a semantic swamp. Carried to an extreme, McLuhan's idea that the "medium is the message" conveys the notion that one's language not only forms what one perceives but is also inseparable from it. There is real danger in this unbalanced notion because it perverts the idea that language is merely a vehicle of expression. It tends to make language the driver of that vehicle. Man, then, is no longer in control of his expressive activity. If all knowledge, all discipline, consists merely of word hoards, as our critics maintain, and if we language teachers merely convey content then we are no longer in control of our media! In other words, we are being accused of dealing with composition as message rather than as medium, or as content rather than as activity!

Meaning, it is true, may be in people rather than in words, but it is man who has, through successive acts of intellect, assigned meanings to words. In summary, then: We offer you new views of these ancient philosophical

questions: (1) Man is a unique composite of body and spirit. (2) Man knows, by perceiving the world with his five senses, and through his intellection considers his sensual impressions and abstracts from them ideas, or meanings to which he gives names, or words. (3) Man communicates these ideas by speaking or writing. This is a verbalizing activity and is also an intellectual activity aimed at the transmittal of meaning from one human being to another. This is the heart of the teaching-learning process.

In our new view of these old questions we have suggested that a restoration of balance might be done in these ways: (1) There must be a proper balance in our consideration of body and soul by shifting emphasis from the "feel-not-think" school of thought to the "feel-and-think" school. (2) Our view of man's cognitive process must be put into balance through the basic recognition that sensual perception must be balanced by intellectual reflection of things perceived. (3) We must restore a balance to our teaching of composition by recognizing that verbal communication is an activity rather than the content of a verbal discipline. These are the practical conclusions which can be drawn directly from our philosophical explorations.

In conclusion, I will show you what the restoration of balance can do for the teaching-learning of composition. Like it or not, it will necessitate (1) putting the student in control of words, (2) putting the student in control of meaning, (3) putting the student in control of learning, and (4) putting the student in control of production. This, of course, does not mean that we abrogate our role as teachers, but it does mean that we must learn to restore the balance between our teaching and the students' learning. Like love and marriage--they go together like a horse and carriage!

Perceptive and forward-looking teachers, such as James Moffett have provided certain key concepts. (Note especially Moffett's A Student-Centered Language Art Curriculum, Grades K-13: A Handbook for Teachers.) Composition

cannot be taught through emphasis on grammar - whether prescriptive or descriptive - it doesn't matter. Grammar is just too constrictive and not enough constructive. Composition cannot be taught through linguistics - it is just too confining, too defining and not enough refining! And, sad to say, composition cannot be taught through composition - or through writing. This approach usually tends to confirm students in their habitual modes of expression, rather than to affirm them in a newer modus scribendi.

I suggest to you a new view of an old approach. "In the beginning was the Word. . . ." This may have religious, or mystical significance, but it is also eminently practical. I offer you the heady old wine of words. An intensive, extensive, deep and thorough investigation of our use of words will help illuminate every facet of our multitudinous ways of reaching out to reality, will reflect on our very basis of living and of thinking. The meaningful study of how we use our language, then, of how we attempt to communicate with each other, - must begin with the study of words, with the relationship of these words to reality and with man's control, or lack of control of this relationship.

It is not enough for our students simply to learn to perceive reality, otherwise they lose control of language and the medium does then tend to become the message. The student must learn to reflect on his perceptions, to consider them and to control the form in which he expresses them. For example: Outside our heads there is a vast universe of possible things to pay attention to. We perceive only certain portions of this universe and abstract even less. Some freshmen, from my sad experience, seem to abstract nothing but develop only gut response. But at least this is a beginning! At any rate, what we abstract we label - with our own labels, or those provided us. How we label, or categorize, is practically inseparable from how we talk or write about that abstraction - whether it be lemons or love, hair or hate, pot or peace!

An intense learning of words will soon make the students aware there are various levels, or degrees of abstraction. Some words are more concrete, specific, vivid; others more abstract, general, colorless. We must show students that the general direction of meaning from "outside" our heads to "inside" is from the concrete to the abstract. This cognitive process affects the students' view of the world outside. A balanced view of cognition, then, involves meaning as well as words. The two are inseparable! An obvious fact? Indeed! But how many teaching hours and learning experiences are wasted because we do not recognize the balance between words and their meaning.

Let us consider meaning for a minute. Increasingly abstract, or general words shift meaning from "outside" to "inside." Increasingly concrete words shift meaning from "inside" to "outside." Our main problem as teachers of composition is to preserve this balance between "outside" and "inside." This is the balance between denotation and connotation. Denotation involves meaning that is concrete, extensional, objective, social and "outside." Connotation involves meaning that is abstract, intensional, subjective, personal and "inside." The first involves perception, the second reflection. The two should be inseparable. The two again, like teaching and learning, love and marriage, go together!

In summary, here are some basic concepts to help the student in his language and composition learning: (1) Man gives meaning to words. Man can control meaning. Man can use words to confuse as well as to clarify. (2) The word is not the thing but very often man responds to the symbol as he would to the thing. (3) Man assigns various levels of meanings to words, so these meanings may vary in importance as to the degree that they are concrete or abstract, "outside" or "inside." (4) Man externalizes "outside" words, internalizes "inside" words, hence, efforts at putting words down externally (or as a compositional activity) should be at first in the direction of the

concrete, or "outside" words. (5) Finally, words (whether in language or writing) are <u>living</u>. Language is, therefore, constantly changing. We must not fear change. We must, however, not get into the trap of using old words without recognizing that they may have taken on new meanings.

In spite of the many frustrations facing us teachers of composition, (1) we must not lose sight of the fact that in the classroom we are not teaching hulking jocks or cute chicks. Somewhere inside those warm bodies are human minds with all their vast possibilities - hence the imperative to balance feeling and thinking. (2) We must provide our students with a wealth of words and a wealth of meanings, because the more meanings they have in their experience, the more meanings they can generate, or acquire. (3) We must encourage questioning. (Shades of Socrates!) Questioning leads to a closer observation of systems and language. (4) We must encourage in our students the development of perception and reflection. These are the best ways I know to get our students to observe, judge and act!

But how? There's the rub. No amount of theoretical psycho-linguistic, or philosophical discussion can turn a student on! But you would be amazed at how receptive many students are to a frank discussion of the principles outlined in this paper. Here are a few parting shots: Don't <u>try</u> to teach. Let them learn. Provide them with the words. Discuss words. Discuss meanings. Discuss thought and thinking. Begin with concrete, "outside" words. Let them string them together or compose them in any way they can - forgetting for the time such drab notions of grammar, syntax and linguistics. When they ask "What do you want?," tell them you, the teacher, do not <u>want</u> anything of them. Tell them to write for themselves - or for their peers. Emphasize they are not writing for <u>you</u>, the teacher. Don't emphasize competence - rather emphasize performance. Let the student start with his own actual use of language as social communication. With his growing aware-

ness of words, meaning and performance presented by an understanding and equally perceptive teacher, he will grow steadily in his compositional skills. Emphasize always that skill in speaking, or writing depends on thinking. A writing assignment is a thinking assignment. Perception, reflection and verbalizing involve thinking - always. The words and meanings verbalized by the students come directly from the every-day experiences of life. So, then, ask your students at first to put their experiences into words - "outside" words at first, later, more "inside" words. Help them expand their perceptive powers. Have them keep a "word-hoard" notebook. Keep expanding their limits. Don't be afraid of trial and error. Don't be afraid of making mistakes. They can often be of great help, especially in classroom action-response situations. Encourage questioning. Try the Socratic method. It may be as hard as pulling teeth at first, but soon students will also begin to ask questions. Make the classroom a community of scholars. Encourage them in group activity to help each other. Have them write to each other, read and comment on each other's papers. All these suggestions, in one way or another will help your students learn. It is infinitely easier to watch, or receive a TV drama than to produce it. That is why composition is difficult - it involves production, or performance. Anything we can do to restore in our students their confidence in their own performing abilities will go a long way to discrediting our most severe critics, - as well as helping our students!

The suggestions contained here, I am sure, will at least provide some insights to a more humane way of teaching. If our critics have accomplished anything worthwhile, it may be that they have shown us that humanity is essential to the teaching of the humanities!

Some useful references exemplifying the various positions presented in my paper. I have rated the presentations plus or minus insofar as they generally reflect a constructive approach or not.

\+ Teaching the Universe of Discourse, James Moffett

\+ A Student-Centered Language Art Curriculum, Grades K-13: A Handbook for Teachers, James Moffett

\+ Teacher, Sylvia Ashton-Warner

\+ "A Newer English," Kenneth Eble, Director, The Project to Improve College Teaching, ADE Bulletin of the Association of Departments of English, Number 27, November 1970.

\+ - The Medium is the Message, Marshall McLuhan

\+ - The Community of Scholars, Paul Goodman

\- Teaching: A Subversive Activity, Neil Postman

\- The Process of Education, Jerome Bruner

\- The Soft Revolution, Neil Postman

I am sure most teachers feel as I do that the book has not been written which exemplifies one's own pet theories. Until that glorious day arrives, here are a few useful texts. In order, they range from the highly unstructured, experimental and innovative to the more traditional. All have much to recommend them.

Montage: Investigations in Language, Sparke & McKowen. Macmillan, 1968.

Juxtaposition, Hogins & Bryant. Science Research Associates, 1971.

The American Madness, Romine & Hughes. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970.

* Here and Now: An Approach to Writing Through Perception, Fred Morgan. Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968.

Words in Context, Bender & Zorn. Holbrook Press, 1970.

* Prose in Practice, James William Johnson. Harcourt Brace & Jovanovich, 1971.

Some Shapers of Man, John H. Bens. Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968.

How to Read the Humanities, Adams & Bigby. Scott, Foresman, 1969.

Critical Thinking: An Anthology for Composition, Zucker & Konigsberg. Macmillan & Co., 1969.

* Those I like. However, the teacher is more important than the text!